



The artist working in her studio at the University of Southern Maine, February 2009

ABOUT MICHELLE FORSYTH

Forsyth, is known for translating often horrific images into time-consuming, hand-finishing processes to address human vulnerability and grief. In this work, she will focus on Maine's 1947 fires. She began her visit by documenting the sites where some of the worst fires were photographed. Rather than view the forest from the vantage point of the disaster's photographs, Forsyth will picture a view of the forest canopy as seen from below. *Canopy* will contain thousands of tiny, brightly colored, cutout circles and leaf-like forms decorated with sequins and beads that will spill down from the ceiling.

Born in Vancouver BC in 1972, Michelle Forsyth holds an MFA from Rutgers University and a BFA from the University of Victoria. She currently resides in Pullman, Washington where she teaches painting and drawing at Washington State University. Her work has been exhibited at venues including Zaum Projects (Lisbon, Portugal); The Hogar Collection (Brooklyn, NY); The Charleston Heights Arts Center (Las Vegas, NV); Deluge Contemporary Art (Victoria, BC); Mercer Union (Toronto, ON); Third Avenue Gallery (Vancouver, BC); Truck Contemporary Art (Calgary, AB); Shift Gallery (Seattle, WA); Lorinda Knight Gallery (Spokane, WA); The Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (Spokane, WA); and The Kirkland Art Center (Seattle, WA). She recently received second prize in the William and Dorothy Yeck award for young painters competition at Miami University in Oxford, OH and her work is included in the book, *Carte Blanche*, Vol. 2 - Painting, a survey and showcase of the current state of Canadian Painting. Forsyth's work is currently featured in a group exhibition *Cutters* at the Hunterdon Museum of Art (Clinton, NJ). For more information on Forsyth, visit her website at <http://www.michelleforsyth.com>.

EXHIBITION INFORMATION

University of Southern Maine's 2009 Visiting-Artist-In-Residence (VAIR), Michelle Forsyth, will turn the Art Gallery into a working studio as she and her USM art student assistants install *Canopy*, a work featuring elaborate cut-paper forms that will be suspended from the ceiling.

VISITING ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAM

The University has had its successful Visiting Artist-in-Residence (VAIR) program since 1986. Visiting artists alternate in representing a variety of disciplines existing both within and outside the department. Students are directly involved with the artist through a flexible course specially designed by the Visiting Artist-in-Residence.

The artist would like to thank the students at the University of Southern Maine who contributed to the production of this work including Aimée Chaput, Rachel Church, Patricia Flynn, Tonya Meikle, Carmen Menjivar, and Nicholas W. Reddy as well as Debe Loughlin and Chris MacWhinnie for helping to make this exhibition possible.

Carolyn Eyler, Director of Exhibition and Programs
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Gallery hours: Tuesday-Friday, 11-4 pm; Saturday-Sunday, 1-5 pm.



MICHELLE FORSYTH

Visiting-Artist-in-Residence

Canopy

February 24-April 8, 2009
University of Southern Maine Art Gallery



Above and cover: the artist's studio at the University of Southern Maine, February 2009

MICHELLE FORSYTH: AN INTRODUCTION

Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear that is inherent in the human condition.

—Graham Greene

The origin of an artist's work is often found in childhood experience rather than in education or influences. It is useful to know how these origins continue to resonate through an artist's later life and work. Writing in *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, psychologist Anthony Storr outlines how many artists' creativity, often in the form of life-long projects, develop as compensation for childhood trauma. This essay about Michelle Forsyth's art and practice will reflect Storr's observation.

Michelle Forsyth grew up on sailboats; between ages eight and sixteen she sailed with her family for three months each summer through Desolation Sound off the coast of British Columbia. Unfortunately, for the young Michelle, sailing seemed acutely dangerous and disaster-prone. Every day she expected the worst. Her constant anxiety and watchfulness evolved into daydreamed stories about disasters at sea, forest fires, urban destruction and the end of the world. Novels about shipwrecks and other disasters that her father enjoyed reading further encouraged her imaginary fears. Children like to frighten themselves, but in this case, there appears to have been no escape, and Michelle hated being frightened.

However, the ocean can be frightening. A sailor must always be careful, and always be prepared for, if not actually expecting, the worst. A sailboat is designed for the dynamic environment of waves, tides, currents and wind. Sailing life is often reduced to holding on, watching the approaching waves or shore, and shouting warnings and instructions. Probably the young Michelle and her two sisters always wore lifejackets, a metaphoric safety line to the boat, but no guarantee of security. She remembers having to watch for rocks while her father maneuvered the boat in tight places. It did not help that he was an aggressive sailor who enjoyed sailing flat out against the wind, and liked putting his family on edge with daredevil antics.

Today, memories of the insecurity of her sailing childhood have evolved into a psychologically and culturally difficult subject and methodology in her art practice. She now searches for a stable balance among her memories, anxieties and craft-like systems in her studio practice to depict the real historic disasters that her work commemorates. Through a kind of voyeurism, she compulsively unravels the personal psychological impact of the dangerous world, both real and imagined, that she was brought up in, as well as actual historic

and contemporary disasters she witnesses through television and the media. These concerns supersede aesthetic, craft process and social or political concerns.

Much of Michelle Forsyth's art prior to this exhibition can be characterized as documentations of secret ritualistic pilgrimages to scenes of disasters, which she experiences obliquely and intuitively. Instead of employing historic photographs, she surreptitiously records metaphors of the site through digital images of mundane near-by presences, such as flowers or clouds, which have no relationship with the historic disaster. The photographs are then translated into thousands of tiny brightly colored, mosaic-like, brush marks, cut paper shapes, found material and glitter, which she paints, or stitches to paper, or pins to walls. She does not recreate images of the disaster itself. Instead, her paintings, empty of horror, are an elegy to the social loss of memory of these events.

Two works related to the same disaster encompass the full range of Forsyth's concerns and methods. On June 17, 1958, the Second Narrows Bridge in Vancouver collapsed during construction. Eighteen workers were killed. Michelle Forsyth's grandfather, who was fishing for crab nearby, was able to rescue several men who had fallen into the water. In the 1990's the bridge was renamed the Ironworker's Memorial Second Narrows Crossing, with memorial plaques at both ends.

In the small watercolor and gouache drawing from 2007, *Second Narrows Bridge Collapse, Vancouver BC, June 17, 1958*, Michelle Forsyth depicts a few small wild flowers near the north end of the bridge. Only vague shapes and color emerge through elaborate patterning to reference the flowers, though they coalesce slightly through squinting. There is no clear pointer to the bridge collapse. Instead, the viewer is drawn into the mesmeric interplay of the carefully applied layers of pattern and color. The historic disaster, as well as its memory, has faded away.



Left: *June 17, 1958 (for my grandfather)*, Paper, watercolor, casein, gouache, felt, beads and pins, 48 x 60 inches, 2007
Right: *Second Narrows Bridge Collapse, Vancouver BC, June 17, 1958*, gouache on watercolor paper, 15 x 22 inches, 2007

The second, much larger, work is more ambitious. *June 17, 1958 (for my grandfather)*, produced a few months later in 2007, is materially closer to Forsyth's creative origins in knitting and needlework, which her mother taught her. Based on a slightly different digital photograph of the same group of flowers, the image has been divided into one-foot sections and then gridded. Forsyth organized a replica of this pattern with one-inch thick pieces of Styrofoam. Into the center of each one-inch grid across the Styrofoam she pins several layers of flower-like shapes that she spends hours cutting from painted paper, Color-aid paper, sandpaper, decorative papers, beads, sequins and glitter. These assorted colors and textures that accumulate on each pin replicate the colors of the photograph in much the way that French Impressionist paintings reduced the subject to a loose grid of colored spots. Once complete the pins were transferred from the Styrofoam to the gallery wall.

This memorial to Michelle Forsyth's grandfather's heroic action during the collapse of the Second Narrows Bridge is closer in materials and methods, as well as spirit, to the installation, titled *Canopy*, she has constructed at the University of Southern Maine. The knowledge and assurance that her grandfather could set the precarious world right for others, and therefore for herself, must be read as a milestone in her career. Chronic grief as negative self-identity has shifted to the notion that the hard work, both physical and psychological, that she learned her craft methods is a meditation on the lifeline between a traumatic childhood and her mature self, and points to the new theme of the canopy as a source or protection in her newest project.

— Brian Grison

Brian Grison is an artist and writer currently living in Victoria BC Canada. He holds a BFA and a BA from the University of Victoria, and an MA from Carleton University, Ottawa.

